

# POINT OF ORDER

The article that follows is one of the nominations for the great achievements of our millennium solicited by the editors of the New York Times Magazine. Some of the Greats are at least partly fanciful, like the best fashion (novelist Alison Lurie says the zipper) and the best invention (semiologist Umberto Eco nominates the legume, which he says saved Europeans in the Dark Ages from perishing because of malnutrition). Some are entirely serious, like lawyer and novelist Scott Turow's nomination for the best trial of the millennium (it took place in 1670, when an English jury refused to be coerced into bringing in a guilty verdict against William Penn and a fellow Quaker). Alberto Manguel's celebration of the best punctuation mark of the millennium, the period, is both fanciful and serious. What would we do without the period? What did we do? Manguel invites us to look at the significance of something we seldom think about but that changed the way we read, write, and even think.—Editor

BY ALBERTO MANGUEL



IMINUTIVE AS a mote of dust, a mere peck of the pen, a crumb on the keyboard, the full stop—the period—is the unsung legislator of our writing systems: Without it, there would be no end to the sorrows of young Werther, and the travels of the Hobbit would have never been completed. Its absence allowed James Joyce to weave *Finnegans Wake* into a perfect circle, and its presence made Henri Michaux compare our essential being to this dot, “a dot that death devours.” It crowns the fulfillment of thought, gives the illusion of conclusiveness, possesses a certain haughtiness that stems, like Napoleon’s, from its minuscule size. Anxious to get going, we require nothing to signal our beginnings, but we need to know when to stop: This tiny memento mori reminds us that everything,

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ourselves included, must one day come to a halt. As an anonymous English teacher suggested in the 1680 “Treatise of Stops, Points or Pauses,” a full stop is “a Note of perfect Sense, and of a perfect Sentence.”



THE NEED to indicate the end of a written phrase is probably as old as writing itself, but the solution, brief and wonderful, was not set down until the Italian Renaissance. For ages, punctuation had been a desperately erratic affair. Already in the first century A.D., the Spanish author Quintilian (who had not read Henry James) had argued that a sentence, as well as expressing a complete idea, had to be capable of being delivered in a single breath. How that sentence should be ended was a matter of personal taste, and for a long time scribes punctuated their texts with all manner of signs and symbols—from a simple blank space to a variety of dots and slashes. In the early fifth century, St. Jerome, translator of the Bible, devised a system known as *per cola et commata*, in which each unity of sense would be signaled by a letter jutting out of the margin, as if beginning a new paragraph. Three centuries later, the *punctus*, or dot, was used to indicate both a pause within the sentence and the sentence’s conclusion. Following such muddled conventions, authors could hardly expect their public to read a text in the sense they had intended.

Then in 1566, Aldus Manutius the Younger, grandson of the great Venetian printer to whom we owe the invention of the paperback, defined the full stop in his punctuation handbook, “Interpungendi ratio.” Here, in clear and unequivocal Latin, Manutius described for the first time its ultimate role and aspect. He thought that he was offering a manual for typographers; he could not have known that he was granting us, future readers, the gifts of sense and music in all the literature to come: Hemingway and his staccato, Beckett and his recitativo, Proust and his largo sostenuto.

“No iron,” Isaac Babel wrote, “can stab the heart with such a force as a full stop put just at the right place.” As an acknowledgment of both the power and the helplessness of the word, nothing else has served us better than this faithful and final speck

